

Legion of Mary Story in Rochester Diocese

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When the history of the Lay Apostolate in the Diocese is written, one of its key chapters will certainly be on the Legion of Mary. Having just passed its 27th birthday in this Diocese, the Legion stands out as one of the most vital instruments of lay action in this area.

With over 800 active members in 104 praesidia (parish units), this "spiritual army" has had a steady and lasting growth. Just 25 years ago, the Legion had 4 units, less than 50 members in the Diocese!

Spread of Mary's Legion locally parallels a world-wide growth of the group during the same period. On five continents today, the Legion counts more than one and a half million active members in some 100,000 praesidia. The Legion auxiliaries, praying arm of the apostolic group, today number more than 10 million worldwide — and are still growing.

Legion members pledge themselves to attend a weekly meeting, usually lasting 90 minutes, and do at least two hours of apostolic work each week. While this tends to limit the Legion to generous souls, those who do persevere, accomplish much for God and the salvation of souls.

A list of the Legion works would be too long to list here, but basically it includes every form of apostolic work except material aid. The Legion handbook recognizes the value of material aid, but forbids Legionaries to extend it, lest this confuse and compromise the basic spiritual work of the Legion. When members encounter someone obviously in need of material help, they are encouraged to report the need to their pastor or to some other group whose aims include material assistance.

Working in close cooperation with their parish priests, Legionaries working in pairs, visit the homes of their parish to take census calls, urge participation in parish groups, distribute Catholic literature, and welcome new families to the parish.

They are active in catechetical work and adult information classes. They maintain parish libraries, take care of pamphlet racks and organize discussion clubs.

Legionaries visit the sick at home and in the hospitals. In Monroe County, they have staffed a Catholic Information booth at the County Fair for the past 12 years. With a new theme each year, illustrated by posters, highlighted by religious films, backed up by give-away pamphlets, the booth has become a popular feature of the fair. 6,800 visitors toured the Legion booth last year.

Legionaries in the Elmira Curia (regional unit) plan to provide a similar booth for the Chemung County fair this fall.

Some Legionaries use their summer vacations for a Peregrination Pro Christo. "Journey for Christ," during which they may assist in home mission areas, build summer camps, instruct adults and children in the faith.

As the reader has gathered by this time, the Legion tends towards Latin-terms. This carries out a basic Legion principle, that of patterning this spiritual army on the famous Roman Legion.

The handbook points out that the original Roman Legion became legendary for its courage, spirit and devotion to duty. What Caesar's Legion did for worldly conquests, the Legion of Mary aspires to do for Christ — with the same sort of courage, spirit and dedication.

Zealous priests see the Legion as a means to multiply their pastoral efforts. As one priest, Father Paul Cuddy, pastor of St. John's, Clyde puts it: "Every parish priest is concerned that he has hundreds of souls in his care, but only two legs and eyes and ears, only one body to go out and serve his flock."

Adding that Our Lord trained disciples to carry out his mission, and sent them out two by two, Father Cuddy sees this as a guide for Legion action.

"No parish priest is ever satisfied with his serving of the people, but the priest who has the Legion is satisfied that much more is done because of these dedicated (Legion) men and women."

The Legion of Mary was born on Sept. 7, 1921, in Dublin, Ireland. A little handful of Catholics, desirous of serving God

in their neighbor, met, placed a statue of Mary on a table, adorned it with two candles and some flowers, knelt to say the Rosary, and then arose to consider what kind of service they could render.

This original meeting set the pattern for Legion meetings ever since — the same around-the-table grouping, Marian altar, group Rosary, discussion of works to be done. The priest director gives a brief spiritual talk, the unit president assigns new work, members report on previous week's assignments. Legion meetings are business-like, orderly — and effective.

An Irish student at Cornell University helped set up the Legion of Mary in the Rochester Diocese. First unit was at Sacred Heart Cathedral Church, next three at St. John's, Clyde and at St. Anne's and St. Monica's, Rochester. The unit at St. Anne's has continued without a break for 27 years.

This particular group — Comforter of the Afflicted (all Legion units are named after some title of Our Lady) has specialized in hospital visitation, particularly the Monroe County Home and Infirmary. Yearly, this group totals up hundreds of visits to patients there. Comments Monsignor William J. Naughton, pastor of St. Anne's, in whose parish this hospital is located:

"Hundreds of people have been helped (by Legionaries) to bear their trials patiently, many have been helped to prepare for eternity."

Support of Priests

Priests who have had working experience with the Legion of Mary usually become staunch Legion boosters, if they weren't before. Priestly enthusiasm for the Legion is personified in the Rochester Diocese by Father John Merklinger, now pastor of St. Alphonsus in Auburn.

Back in 1947, while he was still chaplain at the Monroe County Infirmary and Strong Memorial hospital, Father Merklinger got acquainted with the Legion through the president mentioned before, Comforter of the Afflicted. The loyalty of its members to their work of visiting the sick made a deep impression on him.

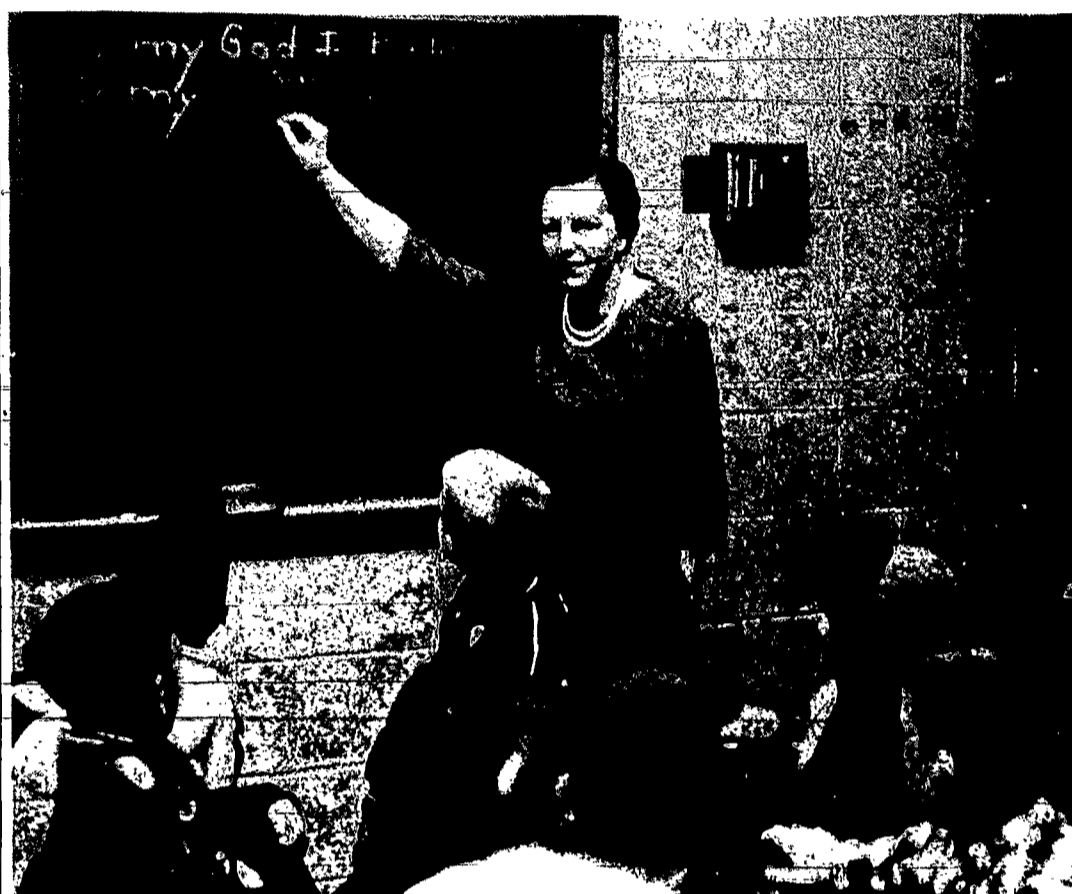
He decided that something this good should be spread throughout the Diocese. When he was appointed Curia spiritual director in 1951, he began to press for Legion extension.

During his 8-year term as Diocesan spiritual director, the Legion of Mary grew from 54 to 53 units; from 60 active members to 600. He sold the Legion to his fellow priests, recruited members personally by the handful. The parish in which he was stationed, St. Anne's, became "Legion headquarters," with four senior and four Junior praesidia operating at one point.

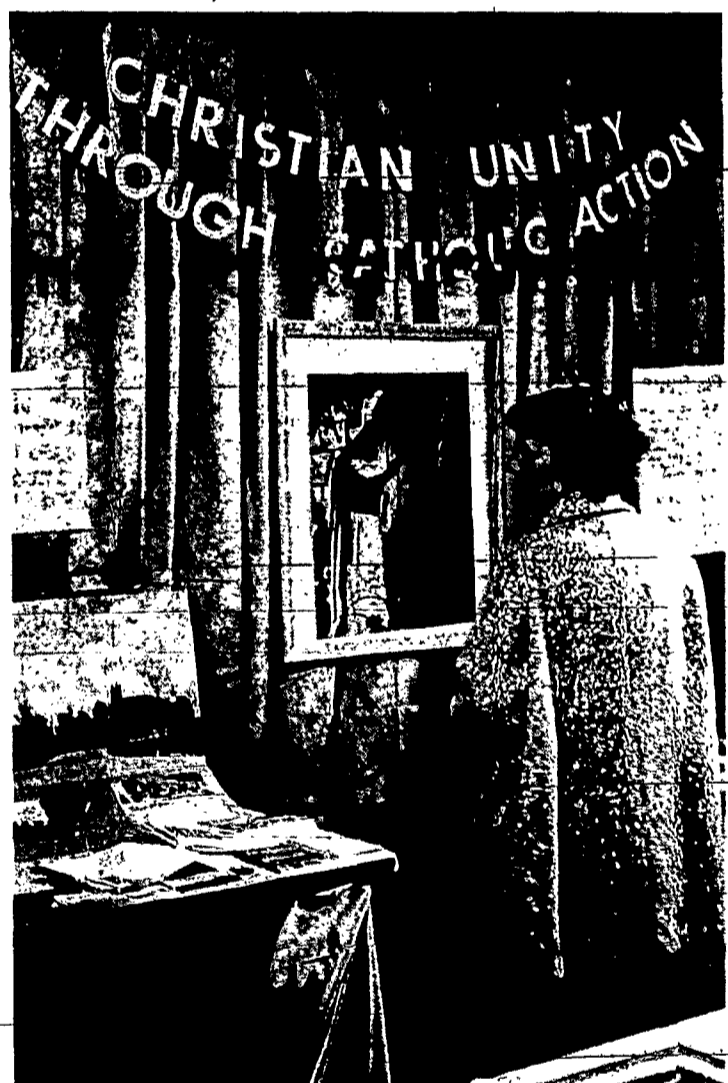
The Legion has continued to grow during the moderatorship of his successor, Father James Marvin, assistant pastor of St. Andrew's Church.



CONGRATULATING A NEW MOTHER at Wayne Community Hospital are Legion members Margaret Noonan and Ruth Dee, from the Newark unit. They present each mother with a tiny medal for her baby, supply information on local baptismal arrangements.



CATECHETICAL WORK is the weekly assignment of Mrs. Mary Schell in Rochester's St. Anne's parish. Many legionaries do this vital work.



APOSTOLATE TO THE CROWD. At the Monroe County Fair each year, the Legion of Mary sets up an exhibit to show some facet of Catholic life and spirit, distributes informative literature to the hundreds of passers-by who stop to view the exhibit.



Currently at the helm of the Legion of Mary in the Rochester Diocese are Edward Adams, Comitium president and Father James Marvin, Comitium spiritual director.

One of the great effects of the Legion has been its power to develop a staunch apostolic

spirit in its members. There is warning in the front of the a steadiness, a fidelity to duty, handbook says:

"The Legion is a system which can be thrown out of balance by suppressing or altering any of its parts. So, if unprepared to work the system exactly as described in these pages —

— please do not start the Legion at all!"

Father Marvin says of the Legion's success: (Continued on Page 16)

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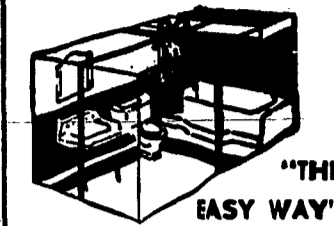
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